

# Inhalant Abuse Task Force



## *A Breath Away News*

### A Campaign to Prevent Inhalant Abuse

Bureau of Substance Abuse Services

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Winter 1998

## LETTER FROM THE BSAS DIRECTOR MAYRA RODRIGUEZ HOWARD

I am pleased to report that the rates of inhalant use have decreased among the Commonwealth's middle school youth. All of you, as participants in the "A Breath Away" campaign spearheaded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, should be heartened by this finding.

Since spring 1995, the Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force has been working throughout the state to prevent inhalant abuse among our children. Through your education and prevention efforts, we have seen a steady increase in public awareness of the issue and in statewide prevention initiatives.

Unfortunately, even though the Massachusetts rates of current inhalant use among youth are decreasing, our rates are still higher than the national average. The best way we can help prevent this dangerous behavior is by continuing to educate parents, teachers, health care professionals, youth service

providers and other concerned individuals about inhalant abuse.

This newsletter has been created to help you with your efforts. Each issue will include the latest information on preventing inhalant abuse; news about the issue; media tips; activities to help you increase awareness in your community as well as listings of available resources and educational materials. We will also keep you updated with information about National Inhalants & Poisons Awareness Week scheduled for March 15 - 21, 1998.

We welcome your comments and suggestions for additional information you would like included in future issues. Through the newsletter and your continued help, we can increase awareness of inhalant abuse and prevent this dangerous behavior. Thank you for your help.

## BUILDING PUBLIC AWARENESS THROUGH MEDIA RELATIONS

Increasing public awareness is key to preventing risky behavior. In the case of inhalant abuse among young people, it is important that parents, teachers, health care professionals, youth service providers and other concerned individuals all understand the scope of the problem and how they can help prevent this dangerous behavior.

One of the most effective ways to reach these important audiences is through local media (newspaper, TV and radio). Key to successfully convincing the media to cover your story is the formation of meaningful partnerships with local editors and reporters.

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TV

Info

radio

news

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The first step in building effective partnerships is identifying the right people at your local newspapers, TV and radio stations who cover health issues. Use this opportunity to introduce yourself and to explain why you are calling. Remember, you and your contacts have much more knowledge of the subject than most reporters will. Letting reporters know there is a local expert available makes their job easier – they will be happy to speak with you.

If there is an immediate story to be told, try to present the idea to reporters as a “news” story – one that moves away from what readers, viewers or listeners typically understand to be the norm. Be prepared to cite examples or important statistics. Be ready with critical time frames and dates. Most importantly, remember that reporters must be convinced that your story is important to their readers, viewers and listeners.

Even if there is no immediate story, call reporters to introduce yourself, explain the issue and offer your expertise. Use simple terms and try not to use too much technical jargon. Invite reporters to call you if they have questions on the subject in the future. Ask if you can forward materials to the reporters for their files. Don't forget to ask reporters how they would like to hear from you about future news items or story ideas that come up. Ask the reporters if they want those ideas submitted by letter, phone, FAX or e-mail.

Maintaining the relationships you develop with local media contacts is as important as introducing yourself and the subject matter. Try to update reporters with new information or timely developments on a regular basis. Again, they will be happy to have the most current information. Always follow up with a call to make sure reporters received the materials and to answer any questions they might have.

By continuing to provide accurate information that is of importance to their readers, viewers and listeners, reporters will begin to rely on you for news about the subject. Maintaining this important relationship on a regular basis increases newspaper, TV and radio awareness of the issue and your reputation as an expert resource. The next time you have an important news item, don't be surprised when reporters not only agree to cover the story for you, but they also offer to do whatever else they can to help.

## STUDY SHOWS INHALANT USE AMONG MASSACHUSETTS YOUTH STILL HIGHER THAN NATIONAL AVERAGES

A study by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) shows that Massachusetts students are using inhalants at rates higher than the national averages even though some statewide rates have dropped. In the Commonwealth, 22% of seventh to twelfth graders have used inhalants at least once in their lifetime and 6% have used inhalants in the past thirty days according to the study prepared by Health and Addictions Research, Inc. Youth in Massachusetts public schools in the sixth to twelfth grade comprised the sample. The study estimated that in the fall of 1996, 80,951 Massachusetts public school students in grades 7-12 had tried inhalants and 21,838 students were current users of inhalants.

Between 1993 (the date of the last statewide survey) and 1996, current inhalant use (that is, within the 30 days before the study) dropped or remained level among all age groups. The largest drop in use was among eighth graders, whose current use dropped from 11.0% to 7.5%.

Current inhalant abuse peaks in eighth (8%) and ninth grade (7%) and then tapers off through the rest of high school as other drugs (such as marijuana, tranquilizers, and amphetamines) are used more. Use is highest among whites (for grades 9-12, lifetime use 22%; for grades 7-8, lifetime use 27%). Use by other ethnic groups is considerably lower.

Among sixth and seventh graders, inhalants were the third most used substance after alcohol and tobacco. In eighth and ninth grade inhalants are the fourth most used substance after alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. In tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade the rates of inhalant use drop significantly among youth still attending school.

The study, conducted in the fall of 1996, is a survey

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## INHALANT ABUSE PREVENTION

### *Resources Available*

As part of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's "A Breath Away" campaign to prevent inhalant abuse, many information resources are available at the regional Massachusetts Prevention Centers and through the Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force. To avoid piquing the curiosity of youth, the major focus to date has been on informing adults.

**PREVENTION LIBRARY:**  
In addition, each regional Prevention Center has a comprehensive prevention library and a resource specialist who can help integrate inhalant-specific information into scientifically validated curricula and/or community initiatives. For the location of the Prevention Center near you, call 617-624-5070.

**TRAINING:**  
The Massachusetts Inhalant Abuse Task Force sponsors trainings on inhalant abuse prevention that are tailored to parents, teachers, school administrators, health educators, nurses, criminal justice professionals, and merchants. For more information, contact Lisa McCoy, CASPAR Youth Program Support Services 617-623-2080.

#### **HANDOUTS:**

Massachusetts Department of Public Health Inhalant Abuse Alert Bulletin  
What We Know About Inhalants In Massachusetts  
What We Know About Inhalants In Massachusetts: Information for Parents  
Parents: What You Can Do About Inhalant Abuse  
Criminal Justice Practitioners: What You Can Do About Inhalant Abuse  
Massachusetts Laws About Inhalant Abuse  
Youth Services Providers: What You Can Do About Inhalant Abuse  
Teachers: What You Can Do About Inhalant Abuse  
Examples of Inhalants in the School  
How Physicians Can Help Clear the Air Regarding Inhalant Abuse  
General Guidelines for Inhalant Abuse Prevention Programming  
Recommended Inhalant Abuse Prevention Materials

These handouts are available by calling 617-623-2080.

#### **VIDEOS:**

"A Wasted Breath: Kids on Inhalants" is for late elementary through middle school students. This video has a discussion guide.

"Inhalant Abuse: Kids in Danger, Adults in the Dark" for adult viewers only.

To borrow these videos, call 617-624-5070 to locate the Prevention Center nearest you.

CALL FOR  
INHALANT  
ABUSE  
HANDOUTS



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of substance abuse based on a statewide random sample of 6,844 public school students. The survey has tracked student substance abuse every three years since 1984. Copies of the full report, "Adolescent Substance Use in Massachusetts: Trends Among Public School Students 1984-1996" (May 1997), are available from Ruth Forstot, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, MDPH, Third Floor, 250 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02108-4619; 617-624-5111.

**NATIONAL INHALANTS  
& POISONS AWARENESS WEEK  
MARCH 15 - 21, 1998**

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## THE INHALANT TASK FORCE... WHO ARE WE?

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Bureau of Substance Abuse Services created the Inhalant Abuse Task Force in February of 1995 to address issues surrounding inhalant abuse in Massachusetts. The Task Force is a joint effort of the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, CASPAR Youth Program Support Services, and the Medical Foundation's Prevention Support Services. The goal of the Task Force is to gather information about inhalant use in the state and to educate providers with up-to-date research on prevalence rates and prevention strategies. For more information about Task Force activities, contact:

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